

E-mail exchanges with a descendant of ‘Shakir’

by Dr. Zahid Aziz

The first e-mail from one Sadiq Hassan, received by us on 7th March 2006, began as below:

“ I read your article about the translation of the Quran by Shakir and am offended and disgusted. If the Quran [translation] had some things in it that contradicted basic Islamic principles, you would have a responsibility to caution Muslims, but instead the article seems to be written as ‘this guy was a fraud, the translation is fine in the sense that it is accurate but (a) he couldn’t have written it, and (b) it was written poorly when things don’t make sense.’

M. Shakir was my great-grandfather, the paternal grandfather of my mother. ”

The writer then went on to defend and explain the changes that I had mentioned:

“ Just because someone has translated a Quran similarly to someone else does not make it plagiarism. You said that the names of the Prophets are given in their transliterated form rather than their English form, which I find excellent.

You show the weakness in this essay when you say: “It is rather amusing to find that in certain places *similar changes have not been made*, due most likely to an oversight!” This is rather pathetic. If you can’t draw links to plagiarism you are implying that Shakir ‘forgot’ to plagiarize. Do you see how ridiculous your statement is.

You also say: “Plagiarised works usually show inconsistencies of this kind. Plagiarists often fail to find all the places in the text which need amendment to give the work their own identity.” This is false. I have explained the reasons for the word meanings being differentiated above. ”

He then offers information about the identity of Shakir:

“ His real name was Mohammedali Habib. He took on Shakir as a pen name. In the article you seem to indicate Mohammedali being two words. We still have this name in our family, and it is still very much one word.

You ask: “The question arises here that if the man named here did actually produce this translation, then why did it not appear in print till *forty years after his death*?”

Reason: His family chose to publish it after his death. He gained a serious illness when he was not yet done translating. He prayed to Allah for time to finish, and *mashallah* he finished translating the Quran and then passed away within 2 weeks.

The one statement I do agree with is this: “It is abundantly clear that the Egyptian Shakir to whom this translation is attributed could not possibly have translated the Quran.”

The man who translated the Quran was Mohammedali Habib from Karachi, Pakistan. I will now copy the exact extract from the Quran that has been published.

The late Mr. Mohammedali Habib was well known throughout the country (Pakistan) for having devoted his life to the cause of humanity. He with his brothers founded many educational and benevolent institutions, the most important being Masoomeen Hospital. This translation was completed by him on the 14th Shaban and the very next day he suffered a severe heart attack and passed away on the 20th of Ramadhan, i.e. 30th March 1959.

This Egyptian story is completely fabricated. If you want further proof, I have access to the original version of the Quran that this man’s family printed, and I am in contact with the four of his children that are still alive, one of which is my grandfather.

I hope that we can fight together for justice and truth in Islam. ”

Below is my reply to this e-mail.

“ It was a pleasant surprise to receive your e-mail and I have read it thoroughly. However, you do not refer anywhere in it to my main conclusion set out at the beginning as well as the end of my article that: The English translation of the Quran purported to have been done by one M. H. Shakir has been plagiarised from Maulana Muhammad Ali’s translation of 1917.

There is also an article by Dr. A. Nihamathullah entitled ‘Translating the Holy Qur’an. Is There An Ultimate Translation Of The Qur’an?’, found on several websites, within which the author writes that, according to A.R. Kidwai, M.H. Shakir’s translation is “an example of blatant plagiarism in that about 90% of this English translation has been verbatim copied from Muhammad Ali Lahori’s English translation of the Quran.”

I am surprised that you say nothing regarding my main conclusion.

You have defended the alterations that I listed as having been made in Shakir from Maulana Muhammad Ali’s 1917 edition. However, I was not attacking these changes! I am merely indicating the changes made in Shakir’s translation from Maulana Muhammad Ali’s 1917 edition. In other words, Shakir is copying Maulana Muhammad Ali’s 1917 edition and making a few changes in it here and there.

My further point about these changes being inconsistent is absolutely right. In the cases that I cited, Shakir has changed the meaning in one place but in the other he has retained Maulana Muhammad Ali’s meaning. It is glaringly obvious that Shakir is making changes in Maulana Muhammad Ali’s translation, and has not been able to do it consistently.

As you say, “This Egyptian story is completely fabricated”, but the world deserves to know who made the fabrication and why did they link the Egyptian judge with this translation?

At the end of your e-mail, you rightly refer to the need to fight for justice and truth in Islam. The first step towards justice and truth in the case we are discussing would be for the publishers of the Shakir translation to acknowledge publicly that it is mostly a word-for-word copy of Maulana Muhammad Ali’s 1917 edition with certain changes made by Shakir of the kind I discussed in my article. ”

Further exchanges

Sadiq Hassan’s reply to my e-mail repeated some of his earlier irrelevant points, but he did ask me to provide a website link where he could read the 1917 edition of Maulana Muhammad Ali’s translation. He also wrote:

“... hypothetically, even if it is a plagiarist copy, what is the need to publicize it? The Prophet has said that you should always cover others’ faults for the betterment of society.”

I responded to this, on 15th March, by sending him the website link to the page at www.aaiil.org from where the 1917 edition can be viewed online. Also answering his point quoted above, I wrote:

“... one of the reasons to publicise the Shakir plagiarism is simply to show how much other Muslims have benefitted from the work of Maulana Muhammad Ali. If Shakir had himself stated in a Preface that his translation was based on Maulana Muhammad Ali’s work, that would have been at least honest.

You say that the Holy Prophet taught Muslims to cover the faults of each other. Does it mean that if a Muslim passes an examination by largely copying the answers written by another candidate, and claiming those answers to be his own work, then Muslim society should cover that fault? Shakir is claiming that he produced the translation and consequently that he possesses the capability and scholarship to translate the Quran. That is a false claim, made worse by the fact that it is done in connection with the Holy Quran. ”

In his reply dated 16th March, Sadiq Hassan wrote:

“ I just received information from my family and I have the following clarifications:

1) M.H. Shakir did not speak Arabic. He supervised the translation of the Quran which was done by a group of people

2) The aim of his translation was to make the Quran easier to understand by removing words such as ‘thee’.

If someone cheats on a test, they are doing it to help themselves and they are ‘stealing’ from society if you will — they may get into a better university etc. However, M.H. Shakir didn’t get any additional recognition from this Quran — it wasn’t even published until after his death. This does not apply in this case as M.H. Shakir’s aim was to allow more people to understand the Quran — and this is what was achieved. ”

To this I replied on 17th March as follows:

“ Thank you for the interesting information that you have discovered. These facts, that Shakir did not know Arabic and he ‘supervised’ a group of people, show that it is even more misleading to call Shakir as the translator than I had written in my article. The readers of this translation should have been given this information in a preface.

Readers are entitled to know of the capability of a translator to do the work. In this case Shakir is falsely passing off Maulana Muhammad Ali’s great scholarship as his own.

Your second point is absolutely wrong that the aim of Shakir was to remove words such as ‘thee’, simply because he has not at all done so! In the 1917 translation, Maulana Muhammad Ali, as he tells us in his Preface, did not use the word ‘thee’ when it refers to a human being but used it only when it refers to God. Exactly the same is found in Shakir’s work.

You say that Shakir did not get any personal recognition through this plagiarism. But his work has received recognition. And there is such a thing as posthumous recognition, which many great people received who didn’t get it when alive, and Shakir is getting the same quite falsely and by deception. I have seen reviews praising the quality of the language of the ‘Shakir translation’. What they are actually, unknowingly praising is the quality of Maulana Muhammad Ali’s 1917 translation.

Lastly, I am pleased to note that you are not disputing that the Shakir work is a word-for-word copy of Maulana Muhamamd Ali’s 1917 edition except for the differences I pointed out.”

In reply to my point that it is entirely misleading to call Shakir as the translator, Sadiq Hassan made the following bizarre claim:

“I haven’t seen any works that call him the translator, but since most publishing companies require an author, his name was the best since he supervised every single word of how the translation was put together.”

I pointed out in response that the most widespread edition of Shakir, published by Tahrike Tarsile Quran Inc, of Elmhurst, New York, says on the title page: “*Translated* by M.H. Shakir”. Similarly, on the well-known Muslim texts website at the University of Southern California, known as USC-MSA, three translations of the Quran are available. It is stated under acknowledgements: “We also wish to thank M. H. Shakir for *his translation* of the Quran”.

Sadiq Hasan also wrote in the same message:

“Please forgive me, but I have not had a chance to look at the link you sent me with the translation, as I am currently on vacation. I will, however, get back to my home town on Sunday and I will look at it then, and compare the two works.”

So I asked him to reply whenever it was convenient for him. That was on 18th March. After waiting for six weeks I sent him this reminder on 1st May 2006:

“ I wonder if you have yet been able to compare the Shakir translation with the 1917 edition of Maulana Muhammad Ali’s translation, since your last e-mail to me of 18th March. I had earlier given you the link where the 1917 edition can be read online. After you have done the comparison, please let me know if you still consider my article to be inaccurate; and if so, in what way.

Do please also let me know if you still stand by your first sentence in your first e-mail to me, which was as follows: ‘I read your article about the translation of the Quran by Shakir and am offended and disgusted.’ ”

Up till now, 20th June 2006, I have not received any response from Sadiq Hassan to this reminder, while during our earlier exchange he was replying within one day. We can only surmise that his family members have advised him to discontinue this communication.
